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Under the Bridge: Poems by Faith Shepherd with Critical Introduction

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UNDER THE BRIDGE:

POEMS BY FAITH SHEPHERD WITH CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

by

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The first poem with which I became fully engaged—that is, the first poem with which I interacted beyond one or two readings—was Wallace Stevens' "Autumn Refrain" my senior year in high school. At this point in my life, I was already enamored with literature, and I had written fair amounts of "poetry" for my high school creative writing classes. However, even though I occasionally enjoyed reading poetry and understood that its language tended to be more compact than other types of literature, if I didn't understand a poem after reading it through once or twice I set it aside and moved on, usually figuring a teacher would explain or map out difficult passages. As a result, reading more than three or four poems at a time simply left me with a headache.

The first time I read through "Autumn Refrain," as part of a summer reading packet for my AP English course, I had no idea what it meant, but the beautiful, flowing language propelled me through the poem. I made one more stab at meaning before I moved onto the next poem in the packet, but ended up flowing through the language and images rather than focusing on the content. By the time I had finished my reading for the day, the phrases of "Autumn Refrain," "The skreak and skritter of evening gone / and grackles gone and sorrows of the sun, / The sorrows of sun, too, gone" (Stevens 129), were still coursing through my brain, and I had to return to the poem. I'm not sure how many times I read through it and reread individual passages, and I have no idea how long it took me, but, when I finally reached an interpretation of the nightingale, the stillness and the other images, I was exultant. I fell in love then and there with the poem and the poet.

I have chosen to examine Wallace Stevens, W.S. Merwin, Sylvia Plath, and Carolyn Forché to introduce my own poetry and place it in a historical literary context because these are the poets who have strongly influenced me, who closely model what are to me the most

important elements of poetry. First, of primary importance to me, I find in these poets a musicality, a careful attention to the sounds and rhythm of their poetry. Stevens was attuned to the rhythm of the phrase, and not many poets can match him in sound. Both Plath and Merwin began writing in the formalist style of Ezra Pound or early T.S. Eliot, a style that was considered the model for poetry in the 1940s and '50s. Although both turned away from formalism in their later poetry, their attention to the packed sound of language continues in their open form poetry. Forché is perhaps not as musical as the others, but she too uses sound to enhance or emphasize meaning within her poetry. My own poetry is also lacking somewhat in the musicality that I so admire, but I have begun to experiment more with sound, paying close attention to the way these poets manage meaning and music.

These poets also employ strong, concrete imagery to create the power of their poetry. Even though he does not quite fit into the Imagism movement, critics often link Stevens to Imagism because he relies on sensory imagery to describe subjects in his poetry, leaving out the explanatory language often associated with the previous poetic movements, Romanticism and Victorianism, against which Modernism was in rebellion. In his later work, with which I am most interested, W.S. Merwin pares his language until it is largely a string of sensory images. Plath's imagery powerfully combines everyday matters, like cutting her thumb with mythic allusion. Carolyn Forché uses detailed imagery to depict the emotion—and often the horror—of the scenes she describes. My own poetry relies heavily on detailed imagery as many of my poems arise out of the attempt to describe an object, emotion, or situation.

Furthermore, all of these poets can be linked to the Romantic tradition and, more precisely, to many of Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas. In "The Poet," for example, Emerson presents the poet as a namer, a prophet, someone who sees or understands more of the world than

the average person and reveals that understanding in poetry. To Emerson, a true poet is not just agile with words and form—to such a person he affords only the term "lyrist"—but also must announce "that which no man foretold" (322). In this way, the poet performs a spiritual function: his poetry "will draw all men sooner or later" because they "stand in need of expression" that only the poet can give (320).

In the poets I have chosen, I find such a connection to the spiritual and a sense of something deeper afoot beyond the meaning of the images themselves. For Stevens and Merwin, it appears to rise out of the need to speak for themselves, to create order in the void left by the loss of Christianity from their lives. For Plath, too, there seems to be a need to create order amidst psychological trauma (like that caused by the death of her Father) and to sound the troubled depths of emotion. Plath's mother remarked that the young poet worked out her rage and other emotions through writing (Wagner-Martin 10). But her poetry moves beyond the confessional as she strives to speak for her generation, particularly the women of her generation, and to name and order their experience. Similarly, Forché seeks meaning in the seemingly chaotic moments in history and our everyday lives. She finds meaning in kinship—with the connection of the individual to the social—and uses it as a guiding principle in her poetry. Her belief that poetry can truly make a difference in the world echoes Emerson's belief in the power of the poet and extends the Romantic idea of the poet as a prophet. In my own *Ars Poetica*, I would not privilege the knowledge or experience of the poet quite as much as Emerson, but the most powerful poetry, as these poets show, reveals something about oneself and life that has perhaps been felt before but has not been expressed in words—or, as Emerson says, "all men live by truth and stand in need of expression," and the poet, through dedication to the exploration of life and words, can give that expression. I seek this kind of expression in my poetry, with

varying degrees of success, and sometimes write poems with the intent to explore emotions or events that I cannot otherwise explain.

Though these poets may at first seem somewhat dissimilar in style and movement, they share, with the probable exception of Forché, the possession of unique, idiosyncratic styles that defy placement within any one poetic movement. Stevens has been called the most romantic of the high Modernists (Gioia, Mason and Schoerke 29), and, alternatively, a "lyric modernist" (Beach 49). Both texts acknowledge the apparent incongruity in these labels. But both also recognize that, while Stevens shared much with the Imagists and wrote in the time of high Modernism, he owed much to the Romantics and American transcendentalists like Emerson. Similarly, according to Cheri Davis, Merwin pursues his own idiosyncratic path. She connects him with Surrealism or the Deep Imagists, but does not feel these movements adequately describe his poetry. For example, she claims that he is more spiritual or down to earth than the Deep Imagists (Davis 19). Plath has often been placed in the confessional school of poetry. However, Ted Hughes and other critics have argued that she creates personae and draws on myth, including her own set of archetypes, mythic symbols, and imagery so as to transcend the confessional nature of her poetry. While Forché is commonly labeled a political poet, her writing style has undergone significant changes over the years, and she argues for the term "poetry of witness." Though these poets have been difficult for critics to place firmly in any one school, they all emphasize the three elements I have mentioned—musicality, strong images, and a depth of meaning approaching the spiritual—the elements that have provided inspiration for my own work.

Wallace Stevens

Stevens' poetry has a strong musical quality that engages the reader and enriches the meaning of his poems. His poem, "Autumn Refrain," is a good example of his mastery of sound. In this poem, Stevens' adept use of sound complements the tone of the poem. He uses repetition and alliteration throughout the poem to drive it forward. "[S]kreak and skritter" and, later, "skreaking and skrittering residuum" reinforce the busy noise of evening (ll. 1, 10). While the alliteration ties the words together, making them not only fun to say but also pleasant to hear, the repetition of the plosive *k* as well as the use of the high frequency *ee* and relatively high *ĭ*, sounds associated with excitement or energy, create a noisy and busy, rather than smooth or flowing, tone in the poem. On the other hand, when referring to the sound of the nightingale in the post-evening stillness, Stevens repeats more fluid consonants, nasal *m* and *n*, and the lower frequency vowels *oo* and *ō*, which are associated with slowness or sluggishness (Nims and Mason 157), so that the overall effect is quiet and fluid:

> ...the moon and moon,
>
> The yellow moon of words about the nightingale
>
> In measureless measures, not a bird for me
>
> But the name of a bird and the name of a nameless air
>
> I have never—shall never hear... (ll.3-7)

Furthermore, the repetition of the *oo* vowel, a lower, darker sound, emphasizes the eeriness of the "desolate sound" of the nightingale (l.14).

Stevens' use of language has influenced my poetry in that, after reading his work, what I most desire to develop in my own is the fusion of sound and meaning, an appropriate musicality. I struggle with how to accomplish this fusion and many of my poems clearly lack the musical

quality I so admire. For example, none of my poems make use of repetition of words or phrases to enhance the flow or sound, and this is one of Stevens' most effective and prevalent devices. However, I have one or two poems that more effectively fuse meaning and sound, even if in my own estimation they do not approach Steven's musicality. In "Did Jesus set Judas up?," I employ alliteration and very slight repetition to augment the speed of the poem, which was important to me to maintain. If the poem moved at a slower pace, it would sound more brooding or resentful than I intended or than a quick pace would convey. In the title, I repeat the soft *s* sound three times in five words. Then, in the first line I use *s* twice, as well as repeating "Judas" from the title, to draw the first line and title together and, thereby, to increase the speed of the transition from title to poem. I alliterate the *s* sound further throughout the poem to keep up the pace, most noticeably in "the silver and smooth / talk of the Sanhedrin" and "the stamp / of Caesar on thirty coins / and a kiss" (ll.11-12, 16-18). In addition, with "Jesus knew— / and Judas knew" (ll.18-19), I repeat the sentence construction—the two phrases are nearly identical—which both enhances sound and maintains the speed of the poem across the decelerating dash.

Aside from the sound of Sevens' poetry, which quality Emerson recognized as important if not the determining factor of a poet, Stevens models several of the characteristics of Emerson's true poet as set forth in Emerson's essay "The Poet." For example, Emerson declares, "the poet is the Namer or Language-maker . . . giving to every one its own name and not another's" (329). In *The Man with the Blue Guitar*, Stevens echoes this idea as he instructs poets to

> Throw away the lights, the definitions,
>
> And say of what you see in the dark

That it is this or that it is that,

But do not use the rotted names. (XXXII.1-4)

He directs poets to "throw away" the overused and/or inaccurate "rotted names" and instead to call things as they appear in the dark, a more elemental state than in the lighted definitions; that is, he directs poets to name things as they really are not simply to refer to them by the names given them under the "lights" of societal convention.

On another level, Stevens "sought to discover a transcendent beauty and a transcendent wisdom in the world itself by means of a union of the imagination and external reality" (Miller 473). Similarly, Emerson said that, "God has not made some beautiful things, but beauty is the Creator of the universe" (321). Stevens was seeking the beauty in things, a beauty Emerson declared was there—even though he may not have shared Emerson's optimism. In *Twentieth Century American Poetics*, Gioia, Mason, and Schoerke state that Stevens "fixated on the central themes of Wordsworth and Coleridge—the relation between intellect and reality, the growth of poetic imagination as an instrument of perception and creativity, and the correspondence between the mind and the natural world" and they claim that this makes Stevens the most romantic of the high Modernists (29). Indeed, one critic linked this belief to what he called "the abiding theme of Wallace Stevens' life and work": a spiritual quest that "amounts ultimately to nothing less than a rediscovery of a sustaining faith through the imagination" (Miller 473). The idea of the ability of imagination to provide a basis for faith or spirituality is closely related to Emerson's declaration that "the religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men" (336).

Stevens' poetic philosophy and his poetry itself reflect and enact the ideas in Emerson's treatise on the poet. That is not to say that Stevens would be Emerson's idea of the true poet as

he sets it forth in the essay, but that Stevens shares an exalted view of the imagination and poetry. Stevens declares,

> The relation of art to life is of the first importance especially in a skeptical age since, in the absence of a belief in God, the mind turns to its own creations and examines them, not alone from the aesthetic point of view, but for what they reveal, for what they validate and invalidate, for the support they give. (Miller 473).

Poetry to Stevens, then, is a replacement for the comforting belief in religion in the wake of Nietzche's shocking assertion that "God is dead." What is most important about this to me is not that I share the same struggle for belief—that I think it necessary to believe in a fiction that I know to be fiction, "there being nothing else" as Stevens reasons (Beach 60)—but that he affirms and recognizes the necessity of belief and that much of his poetry reflects the search for "the supreme fiction," that will offer comfort to its author and readers. Indeed, one of Stevens' notes toward the supreme fiction was that "it must give pleasure since 'the purpose of poetry is to contribute to man's happiness'" (qtd. in Beach 60). Stevens' poetry is all the more beautiful for its ability to offer hope in many ways. The spiritual in his poetry and writings is not an abiding belief in an unchanging god or an unchanging, absolute dogma, but rather the determination to believe. Even for someone who believes differently, there is beauty in the attempt.

Stevens' poem "Sunday Morning" exemplifies his position as a "Romantic Modernist" and the nature of the "spiritual" in his poetry. The poem takes place, as the title suggests, on a Sunday morning where a woman, clearly not attending church, enjoys "coffee and oranges in a sunny chair" (I.2). But then "that old catastrophe" intrudes and she contemplates religion, death, and Christ.

On the Modernist level, Stevens demonstrates his relationship to the methods of Imagism in the opening section. Although he presents a range of striking visual images, he utilizes phrases such as "complacencies of the peignoir" and "the green of freedom of a cockatoo" (I.3), which combine the abstract words "complacencies" and "freedom" with the otherwise concrete imagery. Beach suggests that this line breaks from "the directly visual terms one might find in an Imagist poem" and that through this and later choices of imagery and diction within the poem, Stevens takes "the reader far beyond a strictly Imagist perception of the scene" (56-57). Indeed, we discover in "Sunday Morning" a "meditative or philosophical poem" which is "heavily indebted to the tradition of the Romantic Sublime as practiced by Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Whitman" (Beach 58). Thus, the poem draws upon both the Imagist and Romantic traditions.

As noted, the nature of the poem is meditative and, in dialogue between the poet and the woman, contemplates an earthly paradise to replace the Christian ideal of heaven and earth. When the woman speaker questions the fleetingness of an earthly paradise, the poet counters that any paradise is fleeting which is better anyway than the stagnant paradise of traditional Christian ideology, concluding that "Death is the mother of beauty" (VI.13). It is important to note that the comfort brought by the speaker of the poem is limited—transitory and relies on the finality of death to function—rather than a celebratory replacement for the doubts left by the vacancy of religion, but that it succeeds all the better in Stevens' eyes because it is a believable "fiction" and not a stagnant dogma. Even more significantly, it is the persona of the poet in the poem that instructs the woman in the religious matters of paradise and contentment, suggesting the poet's role, and his power through imagination, to order life's experience, like Emerson's poet.

Furthermore, this poem is an excellent example of the way Stevens combines his wonderful mastery of sound with meaning to create the whole. For example, the first section shifts from the complacency and sensual comfort of the woman's "late coffee and oranges" to a description of "silent Palestine" and (I.2, 14), into the next section, a contemplation of Christ and death. Beach asserts, "Stevens' use of sound in the poem intensifies our sense of this change" (57). In the first line, three accented syllables contain the long "ā" vowel (complácencies of the péignoir, and láte), and in the third line, Stevens repeats the "ee" sound with "green freedom." These vowel sounds are the two highest frequency vowel sounds, which "gives the ear more to process" and "suggests vitality, speed, [and/or] excitement" (Nims & Mason 156). These sounds suggest the vitality of the woman and her initial setting in contrast to "the dreamlike and unworldly quality" of her contemplations at the end of the stanza, which is emphasized by the repeated "w" sound in lines 11 and 12 (Beach 58). In addition, the repetition of the plosive "c" and "p" in the first three lines (complacencies, peignoir, coffee, cockatoo) further propel "the energy of the opening lines" (Beach 58). Thus, the sound represents "the argument the poem will make" that "Christianity is a religion of the dead with little value in the modern world, while true divinity lies in the human and its relation to nature and natural process" (Beach 58). Although he rejects Christianity, Stevens embraces the pleasures of this life and the possibility of happiness.

W.S. Merwin

In his later free-form poetry as well as in the formalist style of his early work, Merwin merges sound and meaning, content and form, in a proficient manner that creates a rich natural sound without sacrificing meaning. In his article on the postmodern aspects of Merwin's poetry,

critic Neal Bowers declares, "Merwin has always integrated form and content, regardless of any current trends or fashions in poetry at large." For an example of this, Bowers point to "Rain at Night " from Merwin's *The Rain in the Trees*. "Rich with alliteration," this poem "shows Merwin in full control of all the formal strategies of free-form poetry" (Bowers). Merwin uses alliteration to create momentum in the poem, particularly with the repetition of the *s* sound throughout: "at last the wind in December / lashing the old trees with rain . . . and somebody dead turned cattle loose / among the stumps . . . the black clouds race over the moon / the rain is falling on the last place" (ll. 2-3, 21-22, 26-27). The liberal use of this sound reminds both of the smooth sound of rain or of the wind, such as they might be heard in a forest setting like the one the speaker presents. This application of sound gives further meaning to the first line of the poem, "This is what I have heard," as it can refer not only to the tale of a trampled, regrowing forest but also to the sound itself of "rain at night." Characteristically, Merwin also employs repetition, particularly of the words "rain" and "wind" to create the music of the poem.

I wrote "Almost Harmony" after reading through *The Rain in the Trees* for the first time. Merwin's style of writing was completely new to me. Among other things, I was struck by his effective use of repetition and sound, and I attempted to compose a poem in his style. Although I do not make use of repetition in "Almost Harmony," like Merwin, I employ alliteration for musical quality and to enhance meaning. In the first stanza, I make repeated use of *b* ("bird," "brownish rubber beak / bluish bit of paper body"); in the second, I use the *k* and *g* sounds ("on the deck above the kids / and Japanese cartoons…captain's seat and pink clouds"; "the mauve waves gold-tipped / in greater contrast under gray lenses"), and in the third, *p* and *b* ("my pencil taps on a piece of paper / between a sleeper and a reader…looking past the puzzle on the tray"; "behind," "band of blue between," "bottom," "blending"). I employed all plosive sounds in the

alliteration to keep the poem from running too smoothly along, contrary to my meaning. The poem explores the meeting of technology and nature. Although technology, in the form of sunglasses and an airplane, enhance the speaker's enjoyment of the natural world, it is still an uneasy meeting, "not quite blending." The plosive alliteration on the one hand draws the images and lines together through the repetition of sound, but, on the other hand, plosive sounds cut off the air for a moment, not allowing one sound to run smoothly into the next and suggesting the same problem or distance for the poem's subjects.

In his later poetry, Merwin rejects the use of punctuation and trims his language until it is largely a string of images. This rejection of punctuation creates more ambiguity in the poem, forcing him to rely more on line breaks to show the stops in sentences and images. Since he also cuts out extraneous, explanatory language, the poem has to rely completely on the expression of the images for meaning. Merwin employs repetition of words and images to draw the various stanzas of the poems together. Many of the images in this stage of Merwin's poetry focus on the tension between humanity and the natural world.

When I wrote "Almost Harmony," I had been contemplating the connection between technology and nature, particularly what seemed to me an ironic enhancement of my enjoyment of the natural world through technology, and I was struggling with a way to express it. Merwin's reduction of language and lack of punctuation appealed to me since some of my poetry has been encumbered with articles, conjunctions and other helper words or phrases that add little to the power or meaning of a poem. Since many of Merwin's poems focus on environmental issues, his style seemed fitting to my preoccupation at the time.

In addition to the strong sense of imagery and sound within Merwin's poems what appeals to me about his writing, as with Stevens, is the search for meaning and the belief in the

ability of the poetic mind to create or discover meaning, the belief in the power of words that informs his poetry. This belief is one of the important themes in Merwin's poetry and this spiritual function of poetry once again coincides with Emerson's presentation of the poet as a spiritual guide. Similarly, critic Eric Hartley speaks of Merwin's interest, found especially in his early poetry, in "the name that discloses the essence of a thing, that illuminates the thing itself" (66); this interest is very akin to Emerson's description of the poet as a "Namer" who gives "to everyone its own name and not another's" (329).

Hartley suggests that Merwin deals directly in his early poetry, and subtly in his later poetry, with the "power through which words create order and thus identity and life" (66). Like Stevens, Merwin was raised in a Christian home (his father was a Presbyterian minister), but rejected a belief in Christianity in his own life. Perhaps it is the void created by the loss of the comforting religion of their youth that leads these two poets to seek meaning or spiritual fulfillment in poetry. In any case, imagination and poetry seem to fulfill "a religious need in these poets; poems are their spiritual explication of reality to themselves" (Davis 34-35). When Merwin declares, "You grieve / Not that heaven does not exist but / that it exists without us" (qtd. in Davis 35), the grieving seems to come from a mind that once accepted or was taught that heaven exists since grief is typically the result of loss.

As I am drawn to Stevens' quest for meaning in poetry, I appreciate the spiritual aspect of Merwin's poetry. I particularly enjoy Merwin's later poetry that leaves the pessimism that often permeated his early works—particularly in his pessimistic book of poems *The Lice*. Some critics complain that what Perkins calls the "naïve affirmation" of Merwin's later work diminishes its artistic value (582). Referring to Merwin's own description of the change in tone, Perkins explains, "All the general reasons for 'pessimism' were as much present as ever, he said, but he

was no longer 'floored' by them" (582). Perkins calls it retreating; Davis senses "diminishment" that "may be a sign of increased self-understanding, a greater ability to love, and an enhanced knowledge of what concerns him" (123).

These critics' desire to connect increased self-understanding and growing optimism with decreased poetic ability troubles me. Although it may seem a rather bold or naïve statement for a 22-year-old to make, through my religious beliefs I am comfortable in the knowledge of who I am and of my general purpose in life and have often wondered if this knowledge would interfere with my ability to write compelling poetry—since much of what drives great poetry seems to be a search for identity or meaning. The idea that the quality of Merwin's writing declined with his own self-knowledge scares me because it only seems to confirm my worst fears about myself as a poet. However, I tend to enjoy Merwin's later work more than the earlier, and I do not sense any diminishment in artistic capability. Indeed, it may very well be this calm sense of self in *Rain in the Trees* that most attracts me. Similarly, critic Neal Bowers declares that *The Rain in the Trees* "reveals a poet at the height of his power [with] all of his technical brilliance and old obsessions on display." Bowers goes so far as to declare, "*The Rain in the Trees* is one of the most remarkable books of the past decade." My own preference for Merwin's later work and Bowers' declaration give me hope for the future possibilities of my own work.

Sylvia Plath

Plath pays careful attention to sound in her poems. Each word seems chosen for its sound as well as meaning. Her use of alliteration, rhyme, and strong verbs enhances the tone as well as the tonal quality. In "Daddy," sound is used to great effect. Plath employs excessive alliteration and rhyme in such a way as to create an ironic tone that undercuts the dramatic

emotion associated with the Holocaust imagery and the subject of patricide. The poem maintains an obsession with the *oo* sound, persistently repeating it in a manner reminiscent of nursery rhyme. It uses the *oo* sound to excess, and the result is something that sounds more like Mother Goose than the serious expressions of a contemporary poet. This relation to nursery rhyme is most evident in the first stanza as the rhyming swords sound like words one might hear in a nursery rhyme ("you," "do," "shoe," "Achoo"); all but two of the eight syllables of the first line contain the *oo* sound. Even though the rhyming language arguably becomes less childlike ("Jew," "brute," "screw") in some places in the poem, the language remains relatively simple throughout, and the result is that the childlike sound of the nursery rhyme undercuts the speaker's emotional distress. Plath also uses excessive alliteration, which, like excessive rhyming, detracts from or belies serious speech. In describing her father as a fascist, the speaker forces out more *oo* rhyming and combines it with the repetition of *b* to create an effect more parodying or humorous than serious: "The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" (ll.49-50). The voice of "Daddy" is split between images of the Holocaust that express the speaker's emotional turmoil and loss of identity and its nursery rhyme language and more light-hearted, ironic images. This split is not evidence of the poet's lack of skill, but is instead carefully crafted into the poem in a way that privileges neither side of the voice and thus suggests the complexity of the speaker's thoughts and emotions.

Just as she uses sound to great effect, Plath is adept at creating emotionally intense, striking images. She often juxtaposes everyday settings or images with surprising, primal or mythic ones, creating tension and energy. In "Nick and the Candlestick," the speaker describes herself as a miner and her nursery as a disturbing "old cave of calcium" where she is wrapped in "Black bat airs" that "weld to [her] like plums" (ll.10, 7, 9), effectively suggesting the feeling of

being trapped or the fear of being swallowed by the cave/nursery. In the poem "Poppies in October," the speaker connects the image of the poppies, whose vivid brightness have caught her off guard, with "the woman in the ambulance / Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly" (ll.2-3). The second image, mentioned as casually as the morning's "sun-clouds" (l.1), shocks and startles the reader in much the same way as the sight of the poppies initially does. In other poems, Plath uses emotionally charged imagery for emotionally charged subjects. In "Daddy," Plath employs references to the Holocaust and images of Nazi Germany to present the speaker's emotional turmoil and identity crisis as she imagines killing her already dead father.

This emotional intensity and energy of Plath's poems have influenced the way I look at composing poetry. Both because my primary approach to poetry has been simply to take an object or event and describe it and because I have been so afraid of sentimentality through emotional images, my poems have tended to be lacking in intensity, often seeming as if nothing is at stake. In contrast, Plath takes an event as commonplace as accidentally cutting a thumb and describes it with imagery of a scalped pilgrim, redcoat soldiers, and even the Ku Klux Klan, creating a wonderfully energetic and engaging poem. After studying Plath, I have looked for ways to overcome my fear of emotion and to bring energy or intensity to my poems. One poem, formerly titled "I saw an icicle fall," was important and engaging to me because I associated the fall of the icicle with the thoughts of my father that attended the experience of watching the icicle fall. However, afraid of overdoing the emotion, I did not work this association into the poem and, as evidenced by the comments of those who read the poem at this stage, it did not move beyond a sensory description of the falling icicle. After revision, the poem now deals

directly with my father, connecting his talk of suicide with the quickly plummeting icicle and giving more weight to the latter description.

Many critics label Plath's poetry confessional because she uses autobiographical details within her poems. However, as many critics argue, her poetry moves beyond the purely confessional as she incorporates myth and mythic elements, and as she attempts to speak not just for herself but also for the women of her generation. In the diary she kept as a sort of literary journal with a persona and the "aim to compose passages that might someday find their home in a certain kind of novel" (Middlebrook 15), Plath writes to describe the "diary I" persona she has created as "that blond girl . . . Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you" (qtd. in Middlebrook 15). As she attempts to make a statement for her generation, she naturally focuses on the female experience, and her poetry treats many themes important to women of her day: male domination or authority, and conflicting feelings toward motherhood, for example.

Her focus on speaking for other women echoes Emerson's belief that "all men live by truth and stand in need of expression" that the poet can give them (320). Similarly, Emerson goes on to declare, "the poet is the person in whom these powers are in balance . . . who sees and handles that which others dream of" (321). Plath "speaks for her generation" because she handles the subject matter, like male domination or mental health, that was important to her contemporaries and affected so many women.

Most often my purpose in writing a poem is not so far-reaching as to speak for my entire generation, even just the women of the generation, since I do not have an inkling as to how I could accomplish such a task. However, I do seek to write poetry that can appeal to and resonate with a wider audience, and I have written poems for a specific audience, hoping to give them expression for which they may "stand in need." I wrote "Adam looks over at Eve" for two close

friends who were struggling with the effects of divorce in their families and who were scared of marriage, or of relationships in general, as a result. Through imagining tension and discord in the relationship of Adam and Eve, the poem suggests that such problems are universal and timeless. However, the poem does not yet fully accomplish the purpose for which it was written, as it does not adequately offer hope for their relationship. At this point, the poem seems to suggest marriage has been a trap for Adam and Eve since neither appears happy, and when Eve "follows Adam to bed," it seems mechanical rather than voluntary. This was not my intention, and I intend future revisions to emphasize the possibility of future accord between the couple despite the current tension. Perhaps on a more trivial note, I wrote "Starting Slowly" because I had several friends who mentioned that their all-important first kiss really wasn't that earth-shattering or enjoyable. More particularly, I wrote this poem for a friend who was convinced there was something wrong with her because she hadn't had a good first experience with kissing and hadn't enjoyed it the few times since. "Starting Slowly" chronicles the speaker's first, disappointing experiences with kissing and her eventual successful experience.

Carolyn Forché

Forché's poetry is not as musical as the other poets studied in this paper, but her poems effectively use sound to enhance meaning. Indeed, in *The Country Between Us*, a more musical form would be incongruous to the disturbing subject matter and would detract from the overall effect. Instead, Forché employs sound more subtly. In "Because One is Always Forgotten," written in memory of José Rudolfo Viera who was killed when he exposed the fact that money designated for agrarian reform was being pocketed by high-ranking officials in the Salvadoran government, Forché "tightly compresses rhythm and images, suggesting that traditional forms

necessarily strain or snap under the weight of political imprisonment, murder, and mutilation" (Coiner 133). She primarily uses monosyllabic words throughout the poem—only ten words in the poem have more than one syllable—suggesting the collapse of language and perhaps the staccato sound of gunfire. When describing the futility of giving one's "heart" to a *campesino*—symbolic of giving sympathy or empathy—she declares, "You can't eat heart in those dark / chambers where a man can be kept years" (ll.5-6). The phrase "You can't eat heart" is composed of spondees, which is an unnatural form of speech in English and "represents language at its most compressed, its most structured" (Coiner 133). These four accented syllables thus draw attention to themselves, emphasizing the phrase that in turn suggests the theme of the poem: sympathy and a poetic elegy are simply not sufficient; "Tenderness is in the hands" and actions are the only sufficient response.

My poem "Around Basra: the half-life of depleted uranium" is centered on the disturbing images of the children around Basra affected by depleted uranium rather than on the musicality of the phrase. There is a slight hint of alliteration with the scattered repetition of the *b* sound as well as of the quite similar *p* sound, both of which tend to interrupt flow rather than facilitate it. The most concentrated use of these sounds occurs in the second stanza: "his belly—a playground ball / lined with blue branching veins" (ll.7-8). The effect is a rather staccato sound as each *p* and *b* stop the flow of air. The disconnected sound emphasizes the incongruity of connecting the boy's situation with the playground and, hopefully, suggests the irony that the playground would be the natural place for him to be if it weren't for his condition.

Although she uses sound to enhance meaning, Forché relies on detailed imagery to establish the power of her poems. Especially when related to atrocities treated within the poems, the imagery is focused on accurate descriptions. "The Colonel" is most indicative of this kind of

imagery as its chronological description and form on the page imitates a newspaper article. In this poem, the most metaphorical description is of the moon swinging "bare on its black cord over the house" (l.4), suggestive perhaps of a "swinging interrogation lamp" and introduced before the main tension of the poem (Coiner 131). The rest of the imagery of the poem, until the last two lines, focuses on the objects of the home and the dinner and of the actions of the Colonel and his family. The last two lines again employ figurative language as they refer to the literal position of the ears on the floor: "Some / of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the / ears on the floor were pressed to the ground." Similarly, "Around Basra" entirely employs literal, descriptive imagery, relying on the images themselves to incite horror and, hopefully, indignation in the reader. Through the title, the poem suggests the cause of deformity in the children described and the last image of the pregnant mother suggests future repercussions; the rest of the poem is literally describes the effects of depleted uranium. Forché often juxtaposes or connects images of ordinary life with the disturbing images of atrocities. This juxtaposition both emphasizes the horror of the atrocity, its singularity, as well as suggesting such things happen in the everyday life of the people she describes. In some way, this also suggests to the reader that, if such a thing is possible in everyday life, such a thing is possible in his/her everyday life. Similarly, the only metaphor in "Around Basra" connects the image of the boy's distended belly with a playground ball, something often associated with the ordinary, everyday life of children. This connection not only emphasizes the misery of the boy's situation but also suggests his situation is not singular.

Forché attempts more with her poetry than simply to present gruesome images to appeal to audiences with shock value and further her own career. When Emerson speaks of the power of the poet, he refers to the poet's superior power to "receive and to impart" the truth and

understanding of which all "stand in need" (320-21). His poet helps humankind by imparting expression. Forché similarly believes in the ability of poetry to speak for those who may not be able to express themselves and further believes that poetry "can be enough" to make a difference when it needs to be made (Forché, "El Salvador" 7). Through her poetry of witness, she attempts to give expression to those who stand most in need, "the victims of atrocity in this century" (Forché, qtd. in Coiner 135). In her article on images of kinship within Forché's poetry, Critic Joann Gardner describes Forché's poetry of witness as "an expression of human suffering under conditions of extremity" (405), and identifies a central theme in Forché's poetry as the kinship which "concerns the issue of the poet's potential position in society; the relative power or powerlessness of language with respect to actual events and the course of history" (406).

Forché further believes in the ability of poetry actually to make a difference, not just to individuals but also between individuals. She sees language as "the primary means of overcoming barriers" (Gardner 411), and affirms the right and necessity of poets to tackle these barriers. She says, "stress of purity [in poetry] generates a feeble estheticism that fails, in its beauty, to communicate" ("El Salvador" 6). When poetry denies the possibility of making a difference, though beautiful, it *fails* to communicate.

Like Forché, I feel poetry "can be enough." The powerful effect of a well-crafted poem is enough to make a difference; perhaps not always in war between nations, but to individuals and groups within nations. Like Stevens, I believe the purpose of poetry is "to contribute to man's happiness." Well-written poetry, whether disturbing or beautiful, contributes to our understanding of ourselves or the world. It enriches the way we experience life. These four poets have influenced me not only because their poetry is well-crafted, but also because their

poems have influenced the way I look at life. My own poetry has often been quite limited in scope or understanding, held back by my excessive fear of sentimentality. In studying these poets, I have furthered my desire to move beyond pretty description.

under the bridge, in Copperton

Driving past fields with the window down,
crisp of outside air, my hair loose
in my mouth, teasing my cheek.
Brown soil delineates lines and curves
in spiky yellow farmers' fields.
A passing truck whips
a candy bar wrapper from the road
against my passenger window.
Then, under the bridge, into Copperton,
mining town turned Stepford:
every lawn mowed
and edged, flower gardens weedless,
bushes religiously trimmed.
I watch the right side of the road
for the old high school turned middle school,
and named for The Bingham Mine—
two stories in the front, lined with rows
of tall windows, a bomb shelter
in the basement, and a balcony
in the auditorium. We swore
it was haunted by the shy girl
who hung herself from the balcony rail—
a source of school pride. And no other
middle school we'd heard of had a B
on the mountain or bleachers
around the outside track.

Anticipating old brick and cracking cement,
I reach an empty lot.
The rubble cleared away,
ground smoothed over—
even the gravel track
and weed-crossed field where deer
used to come down the hill to feed.
Only a chain-link fence and sloping grass left,
and the slightly weathered cement steps
that used to lead somewhere.
No one on the sidewalks,
or in the yards. The well-groomed
fir trees flip me off
as, pushing the speed limit,
I head back to the bridge,
the fields, the almost-deserted
drive home.

Indeterminate Breed

People love her
because they have to—because
you have to love
a strange-looking, awkward puppy
that doesn't look like she knows
whether to pee
or lick your shoes,
who isn't quite sure
she should approach or stay, sit,
and whimper. You pet
the whimpering dog,
coax it, and, feeling a little awkward
yourself, smile to let her know
how special she is.
And all the time you hope
This very special puppy
already has a home.

Coming to appreciate ice

I.
My father threatens suicide—
the family gathered in the living
room, playing Wordigo,
him pressing his back to the recliner,
eyes slatted, clenching
and releasing the recliner's arms—
and vows he won't see another
doctor. My brothers stare at the blue
carpet; I play with letter tiles,
but none of us says anything this time.

II.
I saw an icicle fall

One minute it held, seamlessly
connected to a network of ice
on the overhang
of the roof. The next,
it broke, plummeted.
There was no wavering,
no equivocation.
It simply separated
from its stem
and shattered
on the thawing ground,
leaving a circle
of shining
shards that began
to melt like snow.
It splintered almost
in the same instant
it let go.
There was a terrific
splash.

Almost Harmony

This flat bird on the sidewalk
head twisted
gutless
A brownish rubber beak
bluish bit of paper body
on chipping cement

on the deck above the kids
and Japanese cartoons
below the fish finder
captain's seat and the pink clouds
the mauve waves gold-tipped
in greater contrast under gray lenses
a surprising sharper image

my pencil taps on a piece of paper
between a sleeper and a reader
mom cross-stitches an aisle behind
looking past the puzzle on the tray
a band of blue between defined gray
and the wispy strip of more clouds
at the top of the window
the metal wings at the bottom
gray and white not quite blending

If he can't find it, it's not there

It started inside:
A pinch, an ache
in the back of the neck,
an extended throb in the muscles
of your leg or your hand.
Next, a shooting
spasm through the left arm
to the chest
that wasn't a heart attack—
though you told us, later,
you almost hoped it was
because you could diagnose
a heart attack.
Your doctor smiled
through his white teeth
behind his glasses,
said he couldn't find anything
wrong with you.
He didn't see any reason
for pain. He asked about
your stress,
how things were at home,
were you sleeping
at night? Before
you began your dull,
monosyllabic reply,
he had written out
a prescription for painkillers.
Though, he smiled,
he really couldn't
find anything wrong.

Self-consciously Noting Nightfall

The sky darkens in the center—
charcoal tint spreading out
across dome of evening blue,
lightest at the horizon. Lying flat,
staring straight, I'm looking down
on sky. For a moment,
it's like drowning. I make a note
about being swallowed
in color, and I miss a stage of the waning light.

The dark patch has spread.
It confuses my eyes to look at it so long,
the gradients of color,
no texture, to focus on. My eyes pull
toward the moon and a planet
(the only star).
I stare until my eyes hurt.

As I watch, a small radiance
appears to the right of my vision. It looks
as though it is filtered through a cloud—
a tiny point of light in the middle
refracted into a halo
of white slivers—but there are no clouds.
I can't tell if it's the first appearance
of a star, or a satellite.
It looks like it's moving,
but it stays in the same place.

More haloes appear in the same way
as the first. Night darkens and a plane
flies through the deepest blue. I take notes
on everything. It's now so dark
I can't see what I'm writing.
My hair blocks my eyes but it doesn't matter.

Remembering Aunt Suzanne's Funeral

I.
I felt like a vulture, pulling
roses from bouquets
on the coffin but I wanted one for drying
and, when the funeral was over,
Uncle Kevin had told all the cousins
to take flowers. I picked a soft
pink, blemish-free rose
that was darker at the tips
of the petals and almost white
near the stem—perfect for drying,
when the light color would deepen
to a dusty pink unlike red roses
that turn a garish purple, almost black.
I pulled two more, a peach
and another pink, for Mom
and Janice.

II.
Released from the hospital,
when it was clear the cancer
had finally taken over, Suzanne died at home,
her older children each getting a few minutes
alone to say goodbye. Uncle Kevin sat
with her through the end, holding her hand,
and continued to hold on
as a neighbor, called moments after,
made a mold of their linked hands.
The plaster cast was on display at the church
after the service. Kevin's fingers
interlocked lightly with hers
and their hands stood straight up
on a wooden base,
a figurine for prayer.
I was surprised by the rounded
blemish at the base of her thumb,
and the crisscross of dry lines across the back
of her hand.

III.
After the service and the dedication
of the grave, after the family lunch
at the church house, what I
remember most is dropping flowers

off at their house.
David answered the door, alone
and in stocking feet. His quiet
shyness, the memory of Suzanne
teasing him about girls at the last family party,
their close relationship, and the thought
of the still house behind him…Outside light,
afternoon sun, shone on the carpet at his feet
as he held the door wide for my Mom,
carrying flowers.

My 21st Birthday

No sky behind clouds. The only breaks
just thinnings where light from the half-formed
moon cuts like a flashlight
through a cotton blanket,
and softly delineates rounded edges.
Avoiding the wet eyes and entwined arms
in the kitchen, the feeling of restraint, the third
wheel, I stare too long
at thin spaces in the clouds
so that what had been
three separate moonlit patches
appears to be one. Convinced the wind
has pushed those breaks together,
I re-focus and discover three fragments
of light where I expected to find one. Nothing
has moved except the image
in my eyes. I don't hear
anything except the hint of car doors
or people, far away, walking by.

On a watercolor of a spring scene

How does the wind blow you,
grab you, push you about
until your mind spins around
the tree like a may pole, and your arms
fly to your face and your hips, cavorting?
Until your waist is central
intelligence, and your head hangs
back in the way of newborns
and only the breeze knows
where you're going?
When you bend over backwards like that,
torso parallel to the grass, and stretch
past your stomach, past your frame,
your skin pulls taut,
like a tent canvas.
Then the trees with the pockmarked trunks
and shape shifting leaves—green
and silver—smile at you,
under soiled clouds.
Your hair stands on end of goosebumps
and you fall to the wet ground.

Did Jesus set Judas up?

Of course not. Judas
made his own
choice and he spilled
his own guts
in the empty field.
So what
if Jesus knew
Judas would grow
attached to the moneybag
he carried,
that the silver and smooth
talk of the Sanhedrin
would convince him
the man he followed
was worth no more
than the stamp
of Caesar on thirty coins
and a kiss. Jesus knew—
and Judas knew
in the field
with the silver
the plotters didn't want
back. He closed
his eyes to the stretched
out hand and tied
the rope around the tree
to his own neck.

Adam looks over at Eve

He glances at the crumbs
on the table, and the tear
in her fig leaf apron.
He doesn't like the way her belly
and her arms strain against her dress,
or the way her hair falls
down her neck, over her eyes
out of the bun that used to be tight.

One of the kids sniffles
under the table. He imagines an arm
used as a tissue. Eve doesn't notice
as she spoons stew from the pot.
Adam tosses his napkin, a bit
of old sheet, under the table
says, *Use it*, and finishes
the last dinner roll. She bends down,
sends the child to bed, and glares
at the mud on Adam's feet.
Adam stands up, stretches,
and heads to bed, kicking
a child's blanket out of his path
with the tip of a dirt-encrusted toe.

She wipes at the drops of stew
he spilled on the table, smearing
the circle of brown with a dirty rag
that used to be her favorite dress,
and follows Adam to bed.

Late March
(two haikus)

Sweating under sun
Grassy lines criss-cross bare arms
In shade, I shiver

Sun-blue sky, half moon
Starts in an arc of soft white
Ends a non-formed curve

Tickle Monster

Four and six, in pigtails, we hid between the bed
and the wall, or in the wicker hamper,
and tried to stop giggling as we heard
the tromp of your feet down the hall
like the reverberating beat of a large clock chiming.
Daddy's home. A little breathless,
from under the lid or the covers,
we watched your black loafers enter the room,
and folded our arms across our stomachs,
elbows tight against our sides, protective,
anticipating.

Shy

I'm the girl who waits
at the crosswalk for all the cars to pass,
one foot slightly extended,
head tilted down,
eyes looking up.

The sound of falling hair

The funeral, grandpa's closed casket, the story of crazy Great Uncle Victor, his rotting cars on the family farm, the loaded gun and two dead brothers, I only recall from hearsay—the moment after the phone rang the only memory that is mine. Mom held the scissors and phone in one hand as her other hand, brushing past her pregnant belly, grasped the chair where Dad was sitting, and he covered her tight white knuckles in his. Still draped in the maroon sheet that protected his shirt and jeans from falling hair, Dad stood up, scattering snippets, took the phone from Mom, gently pressing her into the kitchen chair, and finished with the details and quiet goodbyes. I don't remember what came next, who cried or when—just the still throb of his hand on hers, the beating clock, the soft blanket of settling hair.

Starting slowly

I.
I didn't count the time standing
on my porch. You touched
your lips to my lips,
like the touch of a finger to a finger,
or a quick tap on the shoulder
and with just as much chemistry.

II.
In my backyard, I felt
disappointment like a sting of salt
behind my eyes, inside
my ribs. The two-second press
of one pair of dry lips to another seemed
to me to count: "the first."
You said, "Let's try
it again 'til it feels right" and I closed
my head against the blanket
and my shoulders shook
in time with my head, "no."

III.
You slid
your hand across my cheek
and I thought, "I'll break
up with him, this time,
if it doesn't work."
The heat in my stomach
was a surprise and I shifted, opened
my arm around your neck.
I closed my mouth tight,
for a moment, barring the touch
of your tongue. But I held your neck,
and the magnet in my mouth kept trying
to get at the magnet in yours.

Between the knock and the door

Her eyes are round, and gray.
They cover half the length of her face,
no whites. I almost can't see
her nose, her forehead; her tiny mouth
opens outward in a startled "oh!"
The floor falls away in the center,
sloping down into a gray-black
hole. Furniture slips down:
a four-poster bed with a plain white comforter,
a flat pillow, and a dark wood
chair that used to have runners
that rocked back and forth. Only a picture
clings to the wall; a rug
hangs on, pinned by a dresser
that hugs the corner,
planted on remains of planks,
a band of floorboards that circles
the room. The big-eyed girl stands,
hands flat against white plaster,
shuffling her feet along the perimeter, inching
towards the door
and the sound of someone knocking.

Van Winkle tries again

The groom's side was notably empty.
One weathered woman, whom no one seemed to know
sat on the front row, smiling a loose,
toothless smile and nodding her head
while a few spill-overs from the bride's side
sat on the edges of the pews, leaning
across the aisle to converse with relatives and friends.
Rip's son stood a little to the side
of his father, holding the ring and making faces
at little kids, who sat starched and grumpy
next to their parents. Rip glanced
at the door, the organist, the almost familiar
faces in the crowd, and then out
the window to the curve of the dirt trail that led
to the foothills. His eyes twitched
and drooped. The corners of his lips pulled
to a smile as his new bride—a little young,
but not a child—began to walk
towards him and the altar. He shifted
his weight from one foot to the other.
She grabbed his hand when she reached the front
and he tried to look past the veil
to her eyes. The priest spoke, looking from Rip
to the bride, and back to Rip. A tree fell
somewhere nearby, and the sharp crack
of the tearing bark startled
almost everyone. And Rip, holding tight to the edge
of his coat sleeve, tried to stifle a yawn.

Around Basra: the half-life of depleted uranium

His belly extends, it seems,
almost half a foot
above the relaxed *U* of his legs,
his reclining head. His bellybutton
protrudes two inches.

His hand lightly touches the taut curve
of his belly—a playground ball
lined with blue branching veins.
He holds the rounded edge
of a lollipop in one hand, its stick
pointing outward, his black eyes half closed.
Nearby a baby with no eyes,
three fingers, and a full head
of black hair cries through the one opening
that serves for mouth and nostrils.

Somewhere outside, a girl plays
around the shrapnel in her yard.
She looks over, brown-eyes staring,
the tumors around her cheeks sticking out
like flapping gills. Inside, her mother rubs
an extended belly, circling her hands
around its curves, whispering
a hesitant lullaby.

Surprising Pain

Ask me again, Dad. I'll speak
so well, your head will stop rocking,
your mouth will curve into your eyes,
and, for a minute, you won't know
what to ask next in your role
as devil's advocate or how
you taught your daughter
so much. We won't worry
about surgery,
painkillers, or the weight
of metal in your neck.
I'll lean forward
with elbows on my knees,
but you will sit upright,
shoulders and neck not dependent
on the curve of the recliner,
and the light that touches your pupils
won't be borrowed from the living room lamp.

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